24 July 2018 – The long-term crisis affecting Iraq has weakened the country’s capacity to respond to major public health threats. To pursue improvements to health security in the country through strengthening preparedness and response capabilities, and through continued investment to help address health security threats, WHO and the Ministry of Health, Iraq with funding from USAID and ECHO have launched a series of capacity-building workshops for frontline health care workers.

The workshops prioritize 3 key areas: strengthening the public health laboratory system by increasing the capacity of diagnostic and specimen referral networks; improving case management of infectious diseases cases; and enhancing the existing communications and information systems for outbreak response.

Over 200 participants including physicians, laboratory technicians and epidemiologists drawn from the 18 Directorates of Health and districts in Iraq are expected to benefit, and later will scale up the trainings to other frontline health care workers in lower level health facilities.

Dr Sabah, Director of the Communicable Diseases Control Center (CDC), acknowledged WHO’s role in strengthening Iraq’s capacity to prevent, detect and respond to public health threats. He noted that this initiative will build resilient and sustainable human and health systems and strengthen country preparedness for existing and emerging health threats, such as cholera.

WHO has made significant contributions in the past few years to strengthen the country’s
capacities to respond to major public health threats, mainly focused on key areas such as the implementation of the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005). With CDC and other partners, WHO is committed to assisting Iraq with strengthening its national capacity for integrated disease surveillance and response as required by the IHR (2005).

“The recent humanitarian crisis in Iraq has not only resulted in large-scale population displacement but also structural damage to water supply and sewerage systems and poor environmental health conditions, putting hundreds of thousands of people at risk of communicable diseases. Moreover, destruction of health facilities implies that an outbreak could easily overwhelm the country’s health system in addition to the morbidity and mortality that disease may bring,” said Dr Mikiko Senga, the team leader for the Early Warning Alert and Response Network (EWARN) in Iraq.

Given Iraq's increased vulnerability to disease outbreaks, continued investment in health security is paramount if excess morbidity and mortality from epidemic-prone diseases are to be averted. WHO's pledge is to continue working with the Ministry of Health and partners to build a robust national disease surveillance system that will foster national and international public health security.

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